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**Spanish and Portuguese for All in Twenty-First-Century  
Community Colleges in the United States**

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**RESPONSE**

**Encrucijadas y tensiones lingüístico-culturales en la era de la globalización**

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*Hispania* 100.5 (2017): 127–35

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# Spanish and Portuguese for All in Twenty-First-Century Community Colleges in the United States



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**Abstract:** The challenges and opportunities facing Spanish and Portuguese faculty, students, and programs in the twenty-first century are both numerous and significant. A careful consideration of the realities of teaching and learning in this sector, combined with an examination of current and future trends and statistics, provides a framework for identifying and addressing challenges and maximizing opportunities going forward to provide quality programs in Spanish and Portuguese for all students and faculty at community colleges in the United States.

**Keywords:** community college, completion agenda, free community college/universidad de dos años gratis, Spanish and Portuguese enrollment trends/tendencias de matriculación en programas de español y portugués, twenty-first century/siglo XXI

The community college sector promises to be an important and dynamic component in the matrix of higher education in the twenty-first century. Currently, there is intense focus on these institutions, their missions, their importance in terms of economics, and their value within the landscape of higher education in the United States. Internationally, countries as diverse as India, China, and several countries in Latin America are working to establish this uniquely American model within their own systems of higher education. At the same time, there have been loud and clear calls from significant voices, including that of former President Barack Obama, within the United States, to provide free community college for all. In fact some states, including Tennessee and Oregon, have already moved to do so. At the national level, America's College Promise Act of 2015, which would make two years of community college free and provide affordable access to a four-year degree, was introduced in July of 2015 by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA), although it was not voted on in that legislative session.

The community-college-for-all initiative coincides with a growing clamor to provide languages for all within the United States and in other English-speaking countries to meet a current shortage of language specialists (see *The Heart of the Matter* 2013; *Succeeding Globally* 2012; and *Demand and Supply of Language Skills in the UK* 2013, *America's Languages*, 2017). It is likely that much of this task will fall to community colleges in the United States. Certainly Spanish and, to a growing extent, Portuguese will have a prominent role to play.

## The Current Community College Reality

It is an exciting and challenging time for community colleges—and for language programs within these institutions. In *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*, Joshua Wyner (2014) describes the complex mission of these institutions: “The community college has emerged as the primary ‘on-ramp’ to a bachelor’s degree as well as the

'off ramp' to a job. It is the interface not only between high school and a four-year college, but also between would-be workers and employers. The modern community college is the gateway for poor, minority, and immigrant students who seek to realize the American Dream." (141) The importance of the sector cannot be denied, nor can the fact that these institutions are at a crossroads. Paradoxically, funding is dwindling at the same time that outside regulation is expanding, while community colleges continue to be, as one president of a large community college in Maryland puts it, "a destination of hope" for nearly half the undergraduates in the United States (Pollard 2015). While recent political developments may threaten to undermine this dream, many forces are at work to maintain and strengthen the community college role in US higher education.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) publishes data annually regarding US community colleges, their students, and faculty. These data are revealing, not only in terms of the numbers of students served—12.3 million between credit and non-credit offerings, but also in terms of the demographics of the students served. 7.3 million of these take credit-bearing transferable offerings. The most recent data available reveal that community college students represent:

- 41% of all US undergraduates
- 40% of all first-time freshmen
- 56% of all Native American students
- 40% of all Asian/Pacific Islander students
- 43% of all Black students and
- 52% of all Hispanic students in the United States (up from 49% in 2011)

This last statistic—and the fact that it has risen dramatically in recent years while all other groups besides Black students have dropped—is of particular importance in considering curricula at community colleges in the twenty-first century.

In terms of language enrollments within the sector, in the most recent Modern Language Association (MLA) Survey (2013), Spanish represented 60% of all two-year college language enrollments. Total Spanish enrollments in two-year colleges, which had risen steadily between 1983 and 2009, were at 201,154 in the fall of 2013, a 14% drop since the previous survey. (Spanish enrollments in four-year colleges experienced a 5.7% drop and enrollments in graduate programs experienced a 20.5% drop since the previous survey.) This is the first time that this number has dropped in the history of the survey. Of particular note is the fact that 34.7% of total undergraduate Spanish enrollments are at two-year colleges. This is down dramatically from nearly 42% in 2009. Total Portuguese enrollments in two-year colleges, while modest in numbers, had increased 35.4% between 2002 and 2009, but experienced a precipitous decrease of 27.7% between 2009 and 2013 while Portuguese enrollments in four-year colleges increased 13.5% in the same period. This is another statistic that bears watching within the community college sector.

Some of the possible reasons for this decline in Spanish and Portuguese enrollments may be fairly straightforward. It certainly reflects a decrease in college enrollment overall, a general drop in community college enrollments, which is due in part to an improving economy (community college enrollments typically surge under difficult economic conditions) and in part to demographic shifts in the high school population. The latter is a shift that will be reversed in the next few years. The decline in Spanish also reflects a decrease in all undergraduate Spanish enrollments—a first in the history of the MLA survey. Of greater concern is the possibility that this steep decline in Portuguese at the community college level, and to a lesser extent, the drop in Spanish, may also be an unfortunate consequence of the implementation of "completion agenda" initiatives, as described below, sweeping the nation's community colleges.

Faculty at community colleges are also a diverse group of professionals who are dedicated to the art and science of teaching. The AACCC reports that 28% of all full-time faculty in the humanities hold terminal degrees and 69% hold masters' degrees. (Those not holding advanced degrees often teach in very specific programs and are accomplished professionals with deep experience.) Of concern, however, is the fact that nationwide the majority of instruction is delivered by qualified part-time faculty who frequently teach at several institutions and are often on campus only to fulfill their classroom responsibilities. While the growing use of part-time faculty is an issue at all levels, the problem has been particularly acute at community colleges. Some institutions, like Maricopa Community College, are taking active steps to reverse this ratio and support the centrality of teaching in the community college mission (see AACCC 2013). It should be noted that the full-time to part-time faculty ratio can be even less desirable in language departments that rely on part-time faculty to teach less highly enrolled languages. This is certainly the case with Portuguese at many community colleges.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for the Community College in the Twenty-First Century**

In addition to swings in demographics and enrollments, the twenty-first century community college faces a number of very real challenges. As noted in a previous article in *Hispania* on the topic of languages in community colleges, a primary challenge for these institutions is a seemingly perennial issue—the lack of proper articulation agreements in many areas between two- and four-year institutions, a problem that plagues community college students nationwide (Fechter 2010: 76). The call for clearer articulation in language education between community colleges and four-year schools is also underscored in the white paper *Languages for All? Final Report*. (Abbott, Brecht, Davidson, Fenstermacher, Fischer, Rivers, Slater, Weinstein and Wiley 2014). There are wildly different systems of transfer and articulation from state to state and students definitely lose time, credit, and money, an undeniable impediment to student success and completion. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* cite sobering evidence that speaks to the seriousness of this issue (27–31). The fact that in many cases students cannot seamlessly progress in a language between these two types of institutions is not only a disservice to the more than 200,000 students studying Spanish and Portuguese at community colleges, but also negatively impacts upper-level enrollments and matriculation in language majors and minors at four-year institutions. (Fechter 2010: 79).

Increasingly, however, states are mandating smoother articulation policies and procedures between and among state institutions, and community colleges are vigorously developing and signing tight articulation agreements with their four-year counterparts. There is a golden opportunity going forward for Spanish and Portuguese community college faculty to actively participate in these efforts and to take advantage of these initiatives to ensure that their courses become part of these agreements, either as part of a major or in fulfillment of general education requirements.

As noted above, a significant challenge to community colleges and to Spanish and Portuguese programs in this sector has been presented by what is known as The Completion Agenda and corollary mandated “pathways” to degree completion. The Completion Agenda represents a nationwide effort to support the goal to increase the number of students who complete degrees, certificates, and other credentials by 50% within the next decade. A strategy that is quickly gaining attention from legislatures nationwide and from foundations that support The Completion Agenda is the incorporation of mandated pathways—set educational plans that will guide students through a curriculum to degree completion. While Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) present convincing evidence of the effectiveness of such plans, Spanish and Portuguese programs in two-year colleges would do well to monitor this trend carefully as the twenty-first-century

progresses. Set pathways to completion may or may not include languages at the two-year level, but students will certainly be less likely to stray from these paths and choose to explore the study of a language on their own. When these pathways do include languages, community colleges are likely to see increased pressure on Spanish programs, possibly to the exclusion of others. Finally, recently adopted federal financial aid regulations require that federal funds can only be used toward courses that are required for a student's program of study. If languages do not fulfill an element of a student's declared program of study, that student is far less likely to enroll. Once again, it is imperative that language faculty be at the table as guided pathways through programs are articulated.

Assuming that the completion agenda initiatives take a more inclusive and expansive path for student choice and do not relegate less-commonly enrolled languages (or languages in general) to the category of impediments to completion, there is likely to be a return to the previous trend of steadily increasing enrollments in both languages at the community college. Spanish, in particular, may experience a surge when pathways to the undergraduate degree are specified as part of the Complete College America agenda. It is the case currently in some states, including Washington and North Carolina, that students are advised to complete their undergraduate language requirement at the community college. A very positive outcome of the completion agenda is the fact that the unfavorable ratio of full- to part-time faculty is increasingly seen as an impediment to student success and completion. Ideally, increased efforts to rectify this situation will begin to take funding priority.

Adding to the host of challenges facing community colleges and the language programs in that sector is The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The DREAM Act, should it survive, also presents exciting opportunities for community colleges in the twenty-first century. The act provides tuition benefits for undocumented students who completed high school in the United States. Most "dreamers" begin at community colleges; in fact, in some states, such as Maryland and Florida, they are required to begin at a community college and complete their degree in order to be eligible for the tuition benefit at four-year institutions in the state. The vast majority (88.6%) of "dreamers" are heritage speakers of Spanish and, of these, most are from Mexico (see American Immigration Council 2012). At the writing of this current essay, more than twenty states have passed DREAM legislation. The influx of these students, coupled with the fact that 57% of all Hispanic undergraduates in the United States study at community colleges, has clear implications for curricular offerings at these institutions. Spanish faculty at community colleges have a tremendous opportunity here to reshape their current curricula for heritage learners, to create these offerings if they do not currently exist, and to fully develop a coherent program for heritage learners that articulates with their transfer institutions. While this is a situation that bears watching in the current political climate, the trend to this point has been unmistakable. It is certainly prudent to prepare to adequately meet the needs of these learners.

The ever-increasing numbers of Hispanic students on community college campuses coincides with a national focus on the disparity in completion rates between Hispanic and African American students and their white and Asian counterparts at all levels of education. Given the statistics noted above, this is especially acute at community colleges. Closing the achievement gap initiatives are being developed and closely monitored at community colleges nationwide. Spanish programs at community colleges here are facing a golden opportunity to improve the success rates of their Latino students whose first language is Spanish, but who were educated primarily in English. While it has been understood for some time that literacy in the first language can be a high predictor of academic success in children (e.g., Cummins 1991; Cook 1990), heritage learner programs are languishing, with many community colleges offering one or two courses at best. There are few well-articulated, coherent programs at this level, yet there is reason to believe that increasing first-language literacy can positively impact student success.

Dual (or simultaneous) enrollment in high school and community colleges represents a significant and growing trend in the sector. In some districts, dual enrollees earn both high school and college credit; in others, they are completing their last high school requirements and have time to take a college course for college credit only. For example, in the state of Maryland, dual enrollment increased 47% between 2013 and 2014 (see MLDS Center 2016). Some high schools are seeking offerings in languages other than Spanish and French. There is an opportunity for increasing enrollments in Portuguese through this avenue. There is also some unrealized potential for offering more credit-bearing advanced Spanish courses through dual enrollment.

The sector is also experiencing constant calls for innovation in delivery systems and course formats, including online and hybrid or blended offerings. The profession is witnessing a surge in the use of app-based technologies to bring languages to hand-held devices and community college instructors increasingly utilize these technologies in both face-to-face and online offerings. The contributions of technology in teaching language and culture are undeniable (Abbott et al. 2014) and the opportunities for authentic, immediate exchange of language and culture abound.

In 2010, Fechter (2010) notes:

Often lacking at the two-year level in world languages is a true sense of a coherent program of study, as many community colleges do not specifically offer an Associate of Arts degree in languages. The call for such coherence provides community college faculty with a challenge and an opportunity to develop meaningful, vertically articulated curricular offerings that both allow students to systematically progress beyond high school Spanish and to flourish in the university environment, which will result in an increase in enrollments in upper-level courses, and in the workforce. *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* demands that increased attention be paid to the constitutive view of language rather than an instrumentalist or application of language and cultural skills. Many community colleges offer language for specific purposes courses, which some may consider to be purely functional or instrumentalist. The important role these courses play in the community and the workforce should not be ignored, but a thorough reexamination of these curricula to assure that they do, in fact, appropriately incorporate cultural inquiry, as called for in both reports, is in order. The community college provides a fundamental link in the K–20 curriculum and in the workforce. Community college language faculty should embrace this responsibility. (77)

While in the constitutive view the focus is on literary and cultural traditions and historical knowledge, the instrumentalist view focuses on the practical, real-world use of the language. That community colleges are instrumental in bringing language to the work force in the real world is increasingly the case. Abbott et al. (2014) note the increased emphasis on functional language use in higher education in general: “First, undergraduate learning is no longer focused primarily on preparing students for graduate school and academic careers in language and literature. In fact, universities now are providing greater support for second language learners who may not be majoring in the language at all. Second, there is greater emphasis on functional proficiency (linguistic and cross-cultural)” (28; emphasis in original).

### **Twenty-First-Century Initiatives in Education Affecting Community Colleges**

The *Languages for All?* effort referenced earlier embodies a sweeping initiative to advance language in the United States at all levels and to bring language to every citizen, encompassing 100% of graduates of the education system. Abbott et al. (2014) note specifically the growing internationalization of the community college sector:

Another example of the growing presence of language and global focus in higher education is the strong momentum for the “internationalization” of community colleges, as witnessed by the growth of the Community Colleges for International Development (CCID), currently at

approximately 150 domestic and international institutional members, and the International Programs and Services office of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Language teaching and learning are an integral part of internationalization.

Just as in the community college for all initiative, Spanish and Portuguese will play an ever more important role in bringing language and culture to all going forward.

Another twenty-first-century trend in higher education that bears watching is the re-focusing of attention on general and liberal education and essential skills. The American Association of Colleges and Universities' Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative articulates four "essential learning outcomes essential for success in life and work in the twenty-first century. The first of these is "Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World" which is accomplished "through study in the sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts," (American Association of Colleges and Universities 2005). Of particular significance here is that languages are singled out as a discreet area and not simply subsumed under the humanities. Spanish and Portuguese programs at the community college will play a fundamental role in shaping that promise. In the publication *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (2012), the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, commissioned by the United States Department of Education, cites as an essential skill "the ability to communicate in multiple languages." This task force counted with the participation of 134 people representing 61 community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities; 26 civic organizations; nine private and government funding agencies; 15 higher education associations; and 12 disciplinary societies. While the specific inclusion of this skill may have been controversial, language advocates prevailed. All language faculty members should align themselves with these developing trends.

Finally, if the recommendations of the congressionally commissioned report of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century* are carried out, two-year colleges should expect to see increased languages instruction on their campuses. In fact, the Commission on Languages in the report on *America's Languages* is advocating for instituting a language requirement: "... the Commission urges two- and four-year colleges and universities to continue to offer beginning and advanced language instruction to all students, and to reverse recent programmatic cuts wherever possible. It also applauds recent efforts to create new undergraduate language requirements on two- and four-year campuses" (viii). The study also calls for two-year colleges to provide opportunities for advanced study of languages (18) and to advance teacher education programs to help fill the deficit in this area (17).

If, as Fareed Zakaria (2015) declares in *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, "Our age is defined by capitalism, globalization, and technology" (165), then surely the task of language educators and humanists must be to assure that going forward these trends are married to linguistic and cultural proficiency. Zakaria (2015) describes the effect that attacks on a broad-based liberal education have had: "There is today a loss of coherence and purpose surrounding the idea of a liberal education" (20). As language professionals in the twenty-first century, language faculty need to restore that sense of coherence and purpose in the study of Spanish and Portuguese at the community college and beyond.

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Respuesta a “Spanish and Portuguese  
for All in Twenty-First-Century  
Community Colleges in the United States”



## Encrucijadas y tensiones lingüístico-culturales en la era de la globalización

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**Palabras clave:** corporate spirit/corporativismo, culture/cultura, geopolitics/geopolítica, globalization/globalización, otherness/otredad, utilitarianism/utilitarismo

Si bien crisis significa oportunidad para el cambio, y el resultado de toda crisis dependerá siempre de cómo los actores sociales involucrados conjuguen oportunidades y apremios, la situación actual de los *community colleges* en Estados Unidos pone al 50% de la matrícula de los estudiantes de pregrado en el ojo de la tormenta. La bibliografía sobre educación superior suele presentar a estas instituciones destacando su carácter articulador—ya sea entre etapas educativas o actores sociales—o su carácter de tierra prometida de la educación, en la que la población de bajos recursos, las minorías o los inmigrantes encontrarán herramientas para lograr el mentado sueño americano. La realidad muestra, sin embargo, que los *community colleges* no escapan de las reglas generales que el corporativismo global ha impuesto sobre la educación en general: reducción del presupuesto educativo, flexibilización laboral de la planta docente, reestructuración interna en busca de una organización más eficiente en términos utilitarios.

En este contexto es que se da la discusión por el lugar de las lenguas extranjeras en general—y del español en particular—en el diseño curricular universitario así como el planteo por el enfoque que su enseñanza debe adoptar: utilitarista vs. humanista. Obviamente, el primero es el privilegiado por las administraciones que se inclinan a subyugar a los *colleges* a las pragmáticas demandas del mercado, mientras que el segundo se concatena con el deseo de un número de docentes que perciben la imperiosa necesidad de articular contenido significativo y pensamiento crítico al interior de los programas de lenguas para así salir del ostracismo en que por lo general se encuentran sus departamentos. El tercer actor social en cuestión, el estudiante, suele percibir a la lengua extranjera como un requisito para nada relacionado con su especialización y por lo tanto, un obstáculo en el camino hacia su graduación. Aquellos cuyos programas no exigen la lengua extranjera como requisito suelen sentirse aliviados de que así sea. Finalmente, los hablantes nativos suelen acercarse a los programas de lenguas como un modo de obtener créditos sin realizar muchos esfuerzos o para aliviar la pesada carga horaria a la que su situación financiera suele someterlos.

El caso del español se ha vuelto particularmente complejo no solo debido a la transformación demográfica por la cual los latinos se han convertido en la primera minoría de los EE.UU.—según los números arrojados por el censo nacional de 2011, el número de hispanos asciende a 51.927.158, de los cuales 33.138.858 han nacido en los EE.UU. (Motel)—sino también por las circunstancias históricas y geopolíticas que han atravesado la asimétrica relación Latinoamérica-Estados Unidos, relación que (ya avanzada la segunda década del siglo XXI) parecería estar lejos de cambiar de rumbo. Si bien la centralidad que los *community colleges* han logrado en la

nueva coyuntura nacional ofrece ventajosas oportunidades para demandar que el español sea parte de los acuerdos de articulación vigentes (PATHWAYS, DREAM Act, Dual Enrollment), los desafíos seguirán siendo crear e implementar lineamientos pedagógicos coherentes que articulen todos los niveles así como lograr una discusión crítica y sincera de lo que en EE.UU. denominamos “cultura hispana”. En tiempos en que la cultura ha sido promovida a la categoría de recurso utilitario privilegiado del consumo productivo, debemos interrogar el concepto mismo de cultura que hoy hegemoniza nuestra praxis áulica y coloniza el material didáctico derivando en la reproducción de estereotipos y exotizando las geografías y los pueblos latinoamericanos. ¿Es posible escapar de la funcionalización de la producción cultural característica de las dinámicas globales a la hora de configurar los programas de español en un contexto de no inmersión? ¿Es factible dejar de pensar en la cultura hispana como ente homogéneo y direccionar la práctica pedagógica hacia lo cultural como campo de lucha por las (re)producciones de significados sociales en el que se dirimen identidades colectivas e individuales? ¿Somos capaces de trabajar a contrapelo de los estereotipos y en función de poner en evidencia las contradicciones sociales aun cuando esto implique contrariar la maquinaria mediática que nos habita?<sup>1</sup> Enfrentar estos interrogantes se vuelve una necesidad imperiosa si postulamos la responsabilidad ética del discurso pedagógico en función de posibilitar un encuentro igualitario con *el otro* y así lograr grados de entendimiento como sujetos deseantes en un ámbito que, de esta manera, dejará de ser artificial para devenir en liminar.

## NOTAS

<sup>1</sup> Piénsese cuán diferente sería la presente reflexión sobre el español como lengua extranjera en los EE.UU. si esta lengua se hablara solo en España. Me atrevo a afirmar que su situación no sería muy distinta del griego o el alemán.

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